

Eligibility 101

Determining Eligibility for Free and Reduced Price Meals

How Do Students Get Free Or Reduced Price Meals?

- All children in households receiving benefits from Food Assistance (FA), the Family Investment Program (FIP) or another Department of Human Services (DHS) assistance program are eligible for free or reduced price meals.
- Foster children that are under the legal responsibility of a foster care agency or court are eligible for free meals.
- Children participating in their school's Head Start program are eligible for free meals.
- Children who meet the definition of homeless, runaway, or migrant are eligible for free meals.
- Children may receive free or reduced price meals if their household's income is at or below the limits on the Federal Income Eligibility Guidelines (IEGs) which are revised yearly.

How Does My School Know That A Household Is Receiving Food Assistance, FIP Or Assistance From Another DHS Assistance Program?

- In late spring, school districts submit to the Department of Education (DE) in Student Reporting in Iowa (SRI) students enrolled in your district. DHS submits a list of households who receive FA, FIP and another DHS assistance program to the DE. The DE then matches students on SRI to the students on FA, FIP or another DHS assistance program and produces a directly certified list of the students that were matched for each school district. If your school does not submit through SRI, the DE is unable to determine matches for your specific school and thus these schools do not have a direct certification list. Residential Child Care Institutions also will not have access to a list.
- For schools that do not have a direct certification list, the DE offers a tool called ELookUp. This tool allows schools to search for individual students/residents. If found, they are a student/resident from a household that receives FA, FIP or benefits from another DHS assistance program and will receive free or reduced price meal benefits.
- The direct certification lists and ELookup will identify the students that qualify for free meal benefits and the ones that qualify for reduced price meal benefits.
- Due to extended eligibility, if any child or household member receives benefits from FA, FIP, or another DHS assistance program, eligibility for benefits extends to all children who are members of the household.
- A student's eligibility status has year-long duration. Households are not required to report changes in their status.
- If a household does not receive a letter stating that they will automatically get free or reduced price meal benefits and they receive benefits from FA or FIP, the household can complete an Application for Free and Reduced Price Meals. On the application, the household identifies their FA or FIP case number. This unique number (10 digits) qualifies the students in the household for free meal benefits.

What If A Household Does Not Receive FA, FIP or Assistance From Another DHS Assistance Program?

- If a household does not receive FA, FIP or assistance from another DHS assistance program they may qualify for free or reduced price meals based on their household size and income. These households submit an Application for Free or Reduced Price Meals. On the application, households must record the members in their household; amount, source and frequency of their current income for each household member; and the last four digits of the social security number for the household's primary wage earner or indicate that they do not have one.
- It is the responsibility of the Determining Official to compute the household's total current income and compare the total amount to the current year's IEGs. The IEGs provide various household sizes and dollar figures that the income must be below to qualify for reduced price or free meal benefits.
- If a household's income is over the IEGs, then the family is denied benefits and must pay full price for their meals.
- An eligibility determination must be made, the household notified of its status, and the status implemented within 10 operating days of the receipt of the application.

How Are Households Notified Of Their Free Or Reduced Price Status?

- Households who are found on the directly certified list are sent a letter informing them that their children will receive free or reduced price meal benefits. This letter should be sent as soon as possible after the July direct certification list becomes available so that these households know that they do not need to complete an application unless they are informed they will receive reduced price benefits and feel they may qualify for free based on household size and income. In this case they should complete an application.
- If a household is approved for free or reduced price meals via an application, they must be notified either in writing or verbally of their eligibility status. In IowaCNP there is a prototype notification letter under download forms. Using a modified version of this letter or using a letter generated from a POS system requires yearly approval from the State Agency.
- Households with children who are denied benefits must be provided with written notification of the denial. The notification must advise the household of the reason for denial of benefits; right to appeal; instructions on how to appeal; and the ability to re-apply for benefits at any time during the school year.

What Happens If A Household Appeals?

- A household may appeal either the denial of benefits, the level of, or a reduction in benefits for which it has been approved.
- The household must be given 10 calendar days' written advance notice of the change with the first day being the day the notice is sent.
- When a household appeals within the 10 calendar days, the LEA must continue to provide the benefits for which the child was originally approved, until a final determination is made.
- A hearing official designated by the SFA is the individual who conducts the hearing and makes a decision. The hearing official must be an individual who is not connected with the approval or verification process.
- The parties concerned and any designated representative(s) must be notified in writing of the decision of the hearing official. If the hearing official rules that the benefits must be reduced, the actual reduction or termination of benefits must take place no later than 10 operating days after the hearing official's decision.

If The Household Does Not Appeal, What Is The Process?

- When a household does not request an appeal during the 10 calendar day advance notice period, benefits must be reduced or terminated no later than 10 operating days after the notice period.

What Is Verification?

- Verification is confirmation of eligibility for free and reduced price school meals. Verification is only required when eligibility is determined through the application process, not through direct certification or if officials documented a student as homeless, runaway or migrant.
- Households are selected for verification based on a sample pool of approved applications on file as of October 1.
- When a household is selected for verification, the household must be sent a letter informing them of their selection and the types of information they must submit to the SFA, such as pay stubs.
- The SFA must make at least one follow-up attempt when the household does not respond to the request.
- If the household responds and provides all the needed evidence, verification is complete. If the household does not respond, verification is considered complete when a notice of adverse action is sent to the household.
- The SFA must complete the verification activities no later than November 15th of each school year.
- All SFAs must report the results of verification on the Verification Report on IowaCNP.

If I Am Involved In Approving Eligibility Applications, Do I Need Yearly Training?

- If you are the Determining Official or the individual who is responsible for the verification process, you are in an essential position so a minimum of four hours of training is required. If this capacity requires more than 20 hours per week additional training would be required.
- The State Agency recommends that you participate in the following trainings to obtain these hours:
 - Civil Rights, Direct Certification and Eligibility Application Webinar-held every summer,
 - Verification Webinar-held every September, Verification Report Webinar-held every October